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ABSTRACT

The social context in which instruction takes place dramatically affects individual learning, particularly for female and minority students. Social context refers to the understandings and expectations that teachers and students use to make sense of each other's behavior. It is hypothesized that some students fail because learning, as presented by their teachers, does not make sense. Teachers and students from different ethnic groups bring to the classroom diverse cultural expectations about school, what is to be accomplished, and how it is to be done. Class and gender also create cultural expectations that vary within and across ethnic groups. Power and status outside of school affect the social context for learning. Theorists claim that minority children are not as successful as other children in school because years of discrimination and oppression teach them that working hard is futile. Teachers can shape the social context of their classrooms by: (1) acknowledging the effects of cultural expectations on learning; (2) using cooperative learning techniques; (3) working cooperatively with adults who share the cultural heritage of their students; (4) teaching students the cultural rules that define success; (5) insisting that all students become bicultural or multicultural; and (6) preventing information about cultural expectations from becoming another set of stereotypes by which to label students. This paper contains 16 references. (KS)

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THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF SCHOOLING:
WHAT RESEARCH AND THEORY CAN TELL US

by

Bob Croninger

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The Social Context of Schooling: What Research and Theory Can Tell Us

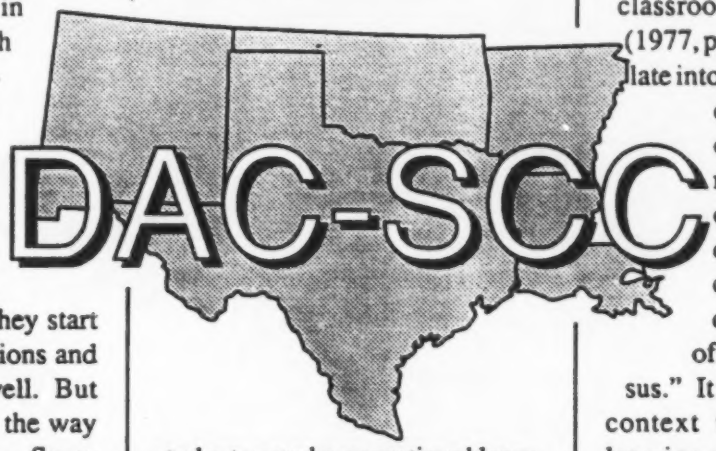
by Bob Croninger, Associate Director for Race Equity of The Programs for Educational Opportunity at the University of Michigan

Editor's Note: *The following is reprinted with permission from the Equity Coalition, Winter 1991.*

Who succeeds in school? Who fails? Years and years of research have given us clear answers to these questions. We know, for example, that children from poor families are more likely to fail than children from economically advantaged homes. We also know that non-white students, especially African-Americans, Hispanics and American Indians, are more likely to become disinterested in critical subjects like math and science, during adolescence. What we know with less certainty is why.

What makes this question especially troublesome is that many of these students are quite capable and intelligent. They start school with high expectations and a strong desire to do well. But something happens along the way to dampen their interests. Some become withdrawn and detached; some become rebellious and defiant. Outside of the classroom, in a different context, these same students may be bright, active, even precocious, but in the classroom they fail to learn or keep up with the other students. Why?

One possible answer deals with the social context that schools construct for learning. The social context, in the sense that I am using it here, refers to the understandings and expectations that teachers and students use to make sense of each other's behavior. That context is formed over time as teachers and students interact with each other, accumulate experiences, attribute meaning, and develop expectations about future behaviors. Some students fail, in other words, because learning, at least learning as it is presented by some teachers, just doesn't make sense to them. In a different context, a context that makes more sense, the same students may be exceptional learners.



In this article I describe some of what research and theory can tell us about the social context in which public schooling takes place and how that context in which instruction occurs, emphasizing especially the effects of that context on the achievement of female students and students of color. Although I emphasize student and teacher interactions, much of what I say can be applied to interactions between other groups of people in the school community as well.

The social context in which instruction takes place dramatically affects individual learning

Robert McDermott refers to the social context of schooling as working agreements about who teachers and students are and what is going on between them. They are agreements that teachers and students form from their accumulated experiences in schools. "In the classroom," McDermott writes (1977, p.199), "these issues translate into how the teacher and children can understand each other's behavior as directed to the best interests of what they are trying to do together and how they can hold each other accountable for any breach of the formulated consensus." It is precisely this social context that makes classroom learning and management intelligible.

McDermott also argues that the agreements formed by teachers and students are of a special nature. They are not simply utilitarian agreements based on mutual interest; they are cooperative agreements based on trust. Students in particular must trust their teachers, trust that what they are doing with them is meaningful, desirable, and beneficial. If a teacher's instructional style is alien to students or the content of instruction is incompatible with norms and values that students learn elsewhere,

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misunderstandings are more likely and trust is more difficult to establish. Without trust, teachers are forced to rely on coercion to justify their authority in the classroom.

What McDermott and others emphasize is that classroom learning is essentially a social process, something that is done together and that requires considerable communication, coordination, and understanding. When students don't learn, the barriers may not reside in the student or even the teacher; the problem may actually reside in their understandings of each other and what they are to accomplish in the classroom. McDermott (1974) argues that even minor differences in how students and teachers construct this context can have disastrous effects on classroom learning, even when students are bright and capable and teachers are skilled and well-intentioned.

Teachers and students from different ethnic groups bring to the classroom diverse cultural expectations about school, what is to be accomplished, and how it is to be done

Most children come to school with high expectations for learning. There is even some evidence suggesting that students of color come to school with higher expectations than average. But these expectations can become dampened by misunderstanding and confusion when teachers and students fail to arrive at workable agreements in the classroom. Sometimes this failure occurs because teachers are unaware of their own expectations and how they may conflict with those of their students. These conflicts, as Ted Wilson and Judith Greenbaum argue in their article, often occur when teachers are locked into their own cultural expectations and fail to recognize alternative ways of understanding student behavior.

Shirley Brice Heath (1983, p. 280), for example, notes that white middle-class teachers often use indirect commands to manage student behavior. They say things like, "Is this where your scissors belong?" These statements obscure the source of the command and tend to confuse children who come from homes in which direct commands are used, such as "Put those scissors in the drawer now," or "Put the paints back where you got them." Heath argues that indirect commands are used to communicate a wide range of important rules to students, including expectations for appropriate behaviors at given times of the day, in specific areas of the school, when interacting with adults, and when disagreements occur. Many students, however, never grasp these expectations because of the form in which they are presented.

A similar argument is made by Carlos Diaz (1989) in a review article about Hispanic cultures and cognitive styles. He notes that most teachers use teaching styles that emphasize competitive learning and the intrinsic appeal that they presume learning has for students. Hispanic students, however, learn better in settings that encourage cooperative learning, and they are strongly motivated by extrinsic values, especially those associated with family. Diaz points out that teachers and students who share a similar cognitive style tend to see each other more positively; those who are mismatched see each other more negatively. Given what we know about the social context for learning, it is easy to understand why.

These difficulties are likely to increase if teachers are not better prepared to deal with cultural differences. The number of immigrants who entered this country during the last decade was as great as the number who entered during the heights of immigration during the early 1900s. Moreover, this new wave of immigrants tends to come from non-European countries in which English is not the native language. As many as four-fifths of these immigrants come from Mexico or countries in Asia (First et al., 1988). Educating these children will require a much greater sensitivity to cultures that are dramatically different from those that currently dominate our schools.

Class and gender also create cultural expectations that vary within and across ethnic groups

Most of what I have said thus far has emphasized misunderstandings that reflect ethnic differences. Misunderstandings also occur, however, because of class and gender differences. These factors affect learning between and within ethnic groups. As James Banks (1988, p. 453) points out, "there are enormous within-group differences caused by factors such as region, gender, and social class."

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Differences in class and gender, both between and within ethnic groups, also need to be examined when considering the social context in which schooling takes place.

Understanding those differences is made complicated by the paucity of research that deals with the relationships between ethnicity, gender, and class. Nonetheless, some studies suggest a number of interesting hypotheses. Class, for example, may have a less powerful effect in shaping the educational expectations and behaviors of non-white groups than it does the expectations of whites. Banks argues that the non-white middle class is still a relatively new phenomenon, particularly among African Americans and Mexican Americans. He also suggests that the effects of class on cognitive style and motivation are counter-balanced by ethnic values that underscore the importance of extended families, families that most often have their roots in poor communities. These factors may explain why several research studies have failed to document class effects on cognitive styles and motivation within specific ethnic groups (Banks, 1988).

Some studies also suggest that female students may be more responsive to non-competitive learning that is positively associated with group goals, regardless of the student's ethnicity (Banks, 1988). One study of urban and suburban students, for example, found that white students and African-American students differ significantly on this dimension, the former being more likely to respond positively to a competitive setting, the latter a cooperative setting. The study also found, however, that much of this difference was directly attributable to the learning preferences of the African-American in the study compared to white boys. Overall, girls were more similar to each other in this regard, whatever their ethnicity.

Finally, some studies suggest that attitudes about gender may be more difficult to change than attitudes about race or class. Christine Sleeter and Carl Grant (1985) did an ethnographic study of a relatively integrated junior high school located in an urban area in the Midwest. They found that most of the students in the school rejected racial prejudices and class biases, that the students were tolerant of racial and class differences, and that many students had close friendships that crossed racial and class lines. Nonetheless, most of the students also had traditional expectations about gender, especially in their interactions with each other, and few questioned the gender roles that they displayed at home or school. Attitudes about gender were relatively rigid and traditional, regardless of the students' race or class.

Power and status outside of school affect the social context for learning, often with disastrous results for students

Teachers and students do not construct the social context of schooling on a blank slate; they construct it from their experiences and expectations, many of which are defined by power and status relationships that exist outside of the school. Many theorists and researchers believe, in other words, that the behavior of students and teachers are profoundly influenced by lessons that they learn outside of school. These lessons, which portray certain groups as more successful than others, are often acted out inside classrooms and the school.

John Ogbu (1986), for example, argues that this principle can be clearly understood by looking at the educational performance of caste-like groups in this country—African Americans, American Indians, and Mexican Americans. He believes that these children do not do as well as other children in school because years of discrimination and oppression teach them that working hard in school is futile. Instead, they develop survival strategies to help them cope with the cultural demands and expectations that dominate most schools. These strategies, as Jonathan Buffalo notes (McDonald, 1989), are profound compromises between economic realities, spiritual needs, and cultural values.

Minimally, these strategies insulate students from the demands of the classroom, but they may also overtly protest expectations that students find discriminatory or unfairly demeaning. Some strategies, for example, emphasize a semblance of compliance while nurturing an alternative value structure. Mary Field Belenky and her colleagues (1986) argue that many girls adopt this strategy toward the male value structure that

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dominates formal education in this country. Other strategies, however, accentuate cultural differences as a form of resistance and protest (Erickson, 1987). Students who openly display their lack of interest in school, who seem to take pride in their "failures," or behave in ways that are considered inappropriate by teachers may actually be protesting cultural expectations fostered by the school that they feel are arbitrary and discriminatory.

Members of dominant groups, of course, are also influenced by experiences and expectations that are formed outside of schools. Elizabeth Cohen (1988) notes that white students tend to dominate classroom interactions with African-American students, even when both groups have similar abilities, family characteristics, and are placed in an instructional setting that formally attributes to them equal status. She believes that white students read the status expectations of the broader culture into classroom situations. This leads them to "dominate" interactions that they have with students of color. Similar explanations have been offered about the manner in which adolescent boys dominate in-school interaction with girls.

So far I have emphasized the manner in which power and status relationships affect the interactions between students and teachers. Lisa Delpit (1988), however, suggests that these relationships also become embedded in instructional philosophies that dominate teacher training and values. African-American teachers, for example, are often criticized for being overly directive and authoritarian in the classroom. Their behavior is sometimes criticized as unprofessional or unskilled, largely because authoritarian approaches to instruction run counter to mainstream pedagogical values that emphasize creativity, imagination, internal motivation, and independent thinking. Yet these values do not accurately reflect beliefs about authority that are held by many African-American students and their parents.

According to Delpit (1988), African-Americans believe that authority must be earned, and their children respond more positively to teachers that exhibit characteristics that African-American culture associates with personal power and ability. Many African-American students, for example, describe unassertive teachers as boring, weak, and ineffectual, in part because these teachers do not act with authority. Teachers whom they describe positively, on the other hand, tend to be more assertive and forceful. One young African-American man described a favorite teacher this way: "We had fun in her class, but she was mean. She pushed, she used to get on me and push me to know. She made me learn" (Delpit. 1988, p. 290). Like this young man, many African-American teachers fondly remember adults who persistently and forcefully demanded that they learn and succeed in school. Their intuitive sense of what worked for them may run counter to the instructional values that dominated their teacher training.

Teachers can shape the social context of their classrooms in six ways

- First, and perhaps most importantly, teachers can acknowledge the effects of cultural expectations on learning. They can become more aware of how their own behavior is strongly influenced by ethnicity, gender, class, and professional training, and they can consider more fully how those expectations may be different from those held by specific groups of students in their classrooms.
- Second, as Martha Adler suggests in her article, teachers can use cooperative learning techniques that give female students and students of color an opportunity to be instructional leaders in the classroom. One way of doing this is to develop lesson plans that require students to cooperate, employ multiple abilities, and share information with each other (Cohen, 1986). Teachers can help students develop a greater awareness of their own abilities and those of their peers if they carefully consider how to share those resources in the classroom.
- Third, teachers can work more cooperatively with adults who share the cultural heritage of their students (Delpit, 1988). That means that teachers must listen carefully to what adults think is educationally appropriate for their children, and it means that teachers must incorporate these ideas into their own instructional goals and strategies. They may need to rely on parents and colleagues who share the culture of their students to establish a level of trust and mutual

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understanding that will allow them to do so. They, like their students, will have to learn how to rely on the resources of others to succeed in culturally diverse classrooms.

• Fourth, teachers can explicitly teach students the cultural rules that define success and the basis for those rules. Lisa Delpit (1988) refers to these rules as the "culture of power." By teaching students that these rules exist, as well as that they are based on power and status relationships within and outside of school, teachers can help girls and students of color better understand the values by which they are likely to be judged. They can also better prepare students to challenge the culture of power and the way in which it imposes limits that are arbitrary, discriminatory, or oppressive.

• Fifth, teachers can insist that all of their students, not just those who are female or non-white, become bicultural or multicultural. This means teaching students the cultural rules of other groups and helping them to understand the cultural logic and wisdom behind them. One obvious example is to advocate bilingualism for all students. Other possibilities are helping students recognize alternative ways of resolving conflict, making decisions, expressing personal values or beliefs, and interacting with others.

• Finally, teachers can prevent information about cultural expectations from becoming yet another set of stereotypes by which to label students. There is a great diversity within groups, a diversity that is overly simplified by generalizations and research findings that report mean differences between groups of people (Cox and Ramirez, 1981). Some boys may do extremely well in cooperative settings. Some Hispanic students may he highly motivated by the intrinsic appeal of a particular task. Some African-American students may be "turned off" by an assertive and authoritarian teacher. Some students from poor households may respond without question to indirect commands or instructions. Not everyone in a group is the same. Teachers need to recognize this and use this kind of information not to catalogue students but to develop strategies for teaching them more effectively.◊

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